

---

---

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 23-05

### Henry Smothers Elementary School

4400 Brooks Street NE

Square 5135, Lot 55

Meeting Date: March 24, 2023  
Applicant: District of Columbia Department of General Services  
Affected ANC: 7D

---

---

The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board designate the Henry Smothers Elementary School at 4400 Brooks Street NE a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the Board forward the nomination under the Multiple Property Document *Public School Buildings in the District of Columbia, 1862-1960* to the National Register of Historic Places for listing under Criteria A and C with a Period of Significance from 1923 to 1938.

The Henry Smothers Elementary School is located at 44<sup>th</sup> and Brooks Street NE, east of the Anacostia River in Ward 7. The three-story red brick school was built in three separate campaigns in 1923, 1927 and 1938 for African American students by the Office of the Municipal Architect under Albert Harris (1923 and 1927 campaigns) and Nathan Wyeth (1938 addition). The school was designed as an “extensible” school and was expanded as the need for more classroom space arose and as funding became available.

As completed in 1938, the school is a symmetrical three-part brick building with a central entry pavilion and side wings, executed in a reduced Colonial Revival style. The building is characterized by its red brick walls and limestone trimming that reflect the established Colonial Revival style for school buildings of both Harris’s and Wyeth’s tenures as municipal architects, though it is less high style than some of the other DC public school buildings designed during the same period. Upon its dedication in 1923, the school was named for Henry Smothers, an educator who established a school for African Americans in the early nineteenth century when no public school system existed for Blacks in the city. The school is the third school building (at three different sites) to have been named in honor of Henry Smothers.

This nomination has been submitted by the D.C. Department of General Services as mitigation for effects to Smothers School due to a recent renovation and addition to it, and in accordance with DC historic preservation law. In 2019-2022, as part of the DC Schools Modernization program, Smothers School was renovated and expanded. The interior of the school, which had little original materials intact, was gutted, and outfitted with new systems and new materials throughout the school. The historic double-loaded corridor plan and classroom spaces were retained. Two contemporary additions—one for classrooms, the other housing a gymnasium—were built at the northwest and northeast corners of the existing school building. The west

classroom addition extends off the west end wall of the historic building and extends north. From the façade this addition reads as a cube-shaped box with gracious glazing atop a solid brick base that attaches itself to the historic building by a narrow, glazed hyphen in an architecturally sensitive manner. The northeast gymnasium addition extends off the rear of the school, leaving the 1927 historic east end wall fully revealed. This addition, though sizeable, is not visible from the front of the historic school building. Despite these major additions, they are both fully distinguished from the historic building whose massing remains entirely intact.



### **Historical and Architectural Background**

Before 1862, organized public schools for African American children did not exist in the District of Columbia. In 1810, a Mary Billings established one of the first schools for African American students on Dumbarton Street in Georgetown, known as the Billings School. Twelve years later, one of her former pupils, Henry Smothers, opened another school for African Americans at 14<sup>th</sup> and H Streets NW. This school was known as the Smothers Schoolhouse before it was renamed the Columbian Institute in 1825, and later again, as Union Seminary.

More than 75 years later, the Smothers name for a school was revived when the city built a school for African Americans on Benning Road that it called Benning School. Confusion arose over the fact that it was near an older existing school called the Benning Road School. So, in 1909, the District Commissioners had the older school renamed Henry Smothers School in response to a petition that argued for it, “Henry Smothers was one of the earliest teachers of his people in the District of Columbia at a time when education was at a premium and illiteracy was rampant. Amid many obstacles he built up a school...which finally found a permanent abode...and subsequently proved beneficial to the community in reducing said illiteracy.”<sup>1</sup> In 1923 upon completion of the new school building at the present site at 44<sup>th</sup> and Brooks Street,

---

<sup>1</sup> “Named after Negro Teacher: Benning Road School Changed to Henry Smothers School,” Evening Star, February 21, 1909.

NE, it was christened the Henry Smothers Elementary School and the old Smothers School on Benning Road was abandoned.

For years before construction of the new Smothers School, the population of city had been steadily increasing and new residential subdivisions were expanding into outlying areas. To accommodate the increasing school enrollment, Albert Harris, the new Municipal Architect began, in 1921, to experiment with “extensible” school buildings. Like Smothers, these extensible buildings were designed to be erected in sections as the surrounding school population warranted and as funds became available. In doing so, Harris abandoned the standard eight-room pinwheel plan for schools and adopted a rectangular, double-loaded-corridor plan that could be expanded more readily. Harris also developed a Five-Year Building Program--a multi-year, city-wide program to provide new school buildings and additions to existing schools. Congress approved appropriation and the funds were distributed city-wide over the course of five years.

The residents around the old Smothers School on Benning Road lobbied hard for a new school building. Their school was woefully overcrowded as developers and builders filled surrounding residential subdivisions with new single-family dwellings that they marketed to “Colored” buyers. The school was old and described in the press as “wholly a disgrace from the point of service and sanitation.” The school lacked electricity and the only artificial lighting was by kerosene lamps, apparently furnished by the neighbors.

In 1921, Congress appropriated \$70,000 for the construction of a new Smothers School. In November of that year, ground was broken on the site at 44<sup>th</sup> and Brooks Street on the first phase of the extensible school building. Construction was halted after bids came in over the allotted funding, but the plans were revised and the school building was completed in September 1922 in time for the new school year. This initial building campaign consisted of the bottom two floors of the present west wing of the school building. The building was covered with a hipped, standing seam tin roof. In 1927, this two-story building was raised to a full three stories in a seamless manner and capped by the flat roof that exists on the west wing of the building today. In 1938, under the Office of Municipal Architect Nathan Wyeth and with partial funding provided by the Public Works Administration, Smothers was greatly enlarged by the addition of the center pavilion, its auditorium wing behind it, and by the east classroom wing that matched that of the original building (now west wing). Together, the school has a T-shaped footprint and symmetrical three-part composition and fenestration.

These additions, which more than doubled the original 1923 structure, accommodated the still-growing population of African American students in the historic Glendale, Hillbrook, Lincoln, and Marshall Heights neighborhoods.

### **Evaluation**

Henry Smothers Elementary School has been evaluated under the Multiple Property Document, *Public School Buildings of Washington, D.C., 1862-1960*. Smothers School meets DC Designation Criteria B (History) and D (Architecture and Urbanism) and National Register Criteria A and C under the Associated Property Sub-type V, “The Office of the Municipal Architect, Albert Harris, 1921-1934” and Property Sub-type VI, “The Office of the Municipal Architect, Nathan C. Wyeth, 1934-46.” Smothers School provides an excellent example of the

evolution of public school building in the District especially during a time of explosive growth in the city's school-age population between World War I and II. It was built during the important Five-Year Building Plan and provides a good example of the "extensible" school building concept devised by Albert Harris to build new schools as need and funding arose. As designed and completed, the red brick, Colonial Revival-style school building is representative of the work of Harris and Wyeth as Municipal Architect as Harris embraced and Wyeth perpetuated the use of the Colonial Revival style for the city's school buildings. Although the building has been renovated and added onto as part of the Modernization program, its historic massing, exterior materials and workmanship remain intact. The school retains its historic location and setting and as a still-functioning school, retains integrity of feeling and association.

The nomination provides good documentation on the physical history and evolution of the school itself but would benefit from additional information on the growth of the neighborhood and the social history of the school.

### **Period of Significance**

The Period of Significance extends from 1923 when the first wing of the school was completed and occupied to 1938 when the building was expanded.

### **Boundaries**

The boundaries of the property include the approximately 1.6-acre lot upon which the school sits (Square 5135 Lot 55).

### **Recommendation**

HPO recommends that the Board designate Smothers Elementary School for the reasons cited above. It further recommends that the nomination be enhanced by some history on the neighborhood and school community and then forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.